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NSC BRIEFING

SINO-SOVIET AND FREE WORLD REACTIONS TO U.S. USE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN LIMITED WAR IN FAR EAST (SNEC 100-7-58)

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I. Background. Of particular interest in connection with Item 3, you will recall that on 26 June NSC, when discussing State-Defense Study on U.S. and Allied limited war capabilities, requested NIE on Sino-Soviet reactions if U.S. used nuclear weapons in responding to local aggression in Far East.

- A. State-Defense study assumed that U.S. responded selectively with nuclear weapons from outset in cases of Communist attacks on South Korea, Taiwan, Quemoy-Matsu, and Vietnam/Laos.
- B. However, study assumed Communists would not use nuclear weapons, since their employment construed as overt involvements of Soviet forces and, under current U.S. strategic concept, such a direct U.S.-Soviet clash would no longer be limited war.

II. In essence, NSC asked us whether this assumption consistent with probable Communist intentions. Intelligence community concluded:

- A. If U.S. used nuclear weapons in meeting Bloc local aggression in Far East, grave risk that Communists would retaliate in kind.  
This is key conclusion.
- B. Though USSR determined to avoid gravely risking general war, it probably calculates that its own growing military capabilities make U.S. too increasingly unlikely to take such risks. Therefore Soviets and Chinese Communists, if they launched FE aggression at all, would probably estimate that their reaction with nuclear weapons in response to U.S. use of them would not necessarily lead to expansion hostilities into general war.

C. If Communists did use nuclears, they would attempt to do so in such manner as to limit such risks of general war. USSR would prefer to avoid open involvement by providing nuclear weapons to its FE allies, though still under Soviet control. Commies would also probably confine their use of nuclear weapons within limits comparable to those observed by U.S.

D. Likelihood of Communist nuclear reaction greatest if U.S. mounted nuclear attacks deep into China. Moscow and Peiping would almost certainly feel compelled to respond by nuclear attacks on U.S. bases and nuclear capable forces in Far East.

III. NSC also asked us to estimate Free World reactions to our use of nuclear weapons.

A. While many Free World governments and countries would be impressed by prompt U.S. resistance to aggression, this would be overshadowed in most countries by widespread fear of general war and wide popular condemnation of U.S., especially in Asia, for having used nuclear weapons.

B. This generally adverse reaction would be mitigated if U.S. response quickly halted aggression without large civilian casualties; respect for U.S. power would be enhanced. On other hand if Communist nuclear retaliation led to prolonged or expanded hostilities fears of general war would rise even higher and great pressure would be exerted on us to reach a settlement.

C. Of course these broad estimates of Free World reactions necessarily conjectural. As DDI Joint Staff pointed out in dissent, many other factors, e.g., U.S. statements at the time, clarity of aggression--would affect Free World reaction at the time.

IV. But clear implication of NIE is that:

- A. U.S. cannot expect to use nuclear weapons in local war without grave risk similar Communist retaliation. We cannot assume enemy would be deterred by fear of general war.
- B. We would have to count on a generally adverse Free World reaction, largely because of fears of general war.